

**BEKIR FATIH MERAL****OBSTACLES TO SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN TURKEY****Abstract**

Turkey has regulations in place with regard to the special education of students with intellectual disabilities on the axis of international and national legal texts. However, the gap between law and practice cannot be denied. The existence of obstacles to special education for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) still continues in Turkey.

**Brief Report**

The major barriers to inclusive educational settings, such as inadequate educational infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, lack of educational professionals and lack of collaboration among professionals, insufficient pre-service and in-service training programmes, as well as negative attitudes towards inclusion (Ciyer, 2010), are typically valid for Turkey as well as for other developing countries. However, in recent years, the main problem for students with ID in inclusive educational settings is the transformation from full inclusion to segregated settings within mainstream general education schools, even though full inclusion was highlighted in Article 23 of the Special Education Services Regulation of Turkey (SESRT, 2006, amended 2012). Research shows that in Turkey, students with other disabilities (e.g. visual, hearing, orthopedic impairments) are likely to be educated in regular classrooms with typically developing peers (Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010; Ciyer, 2010). The number of students in special education classes has been increasing in the last two academic years (Ministry of National Education, MoNE, 2011/12; 2012/13). This situation is an indicator of a contradictory approach with regard to the Least Restrictive Environment principle in inclusive settings.

Turkey has enacted and signed a number of documents such as Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), Constitution Articles 10 (anti-discrimination) and Article 42 (Education For All), UNCRPD (2008), the Turkish Disability Act (2005, amended 2012) Article 3 and Article 41, Turkish Criminal Law Article 122 (anti-discrimination) in order to prevent discrimination in education. Therefore, antidiscrimination is a principle in accordance with the constitutional structure and educational goals of Turkey. However, the existence of some ethnicities cannot be denied in Turkish society. Nevertheless, there is no option when it comes to educating students with ID with the exception of the Turkish language within the constitutional framework. Constitution Article 42 bans the utilization of a different language in the Turkish education system, including special education.

The assessment and placement process involving students with disabilities who come from different ethnicities and languages has been controversial for many years (Rhodes, Ochoa & Ortiz, 2005). For example, the assessment of students using their native language was passed into law by the U.S. Congress under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). This law has now been upgraded as IDEA

mandates the assessment and diagnosis process in a nondiscriminatory manner. Notwithstanding all efforts to clear away the barriers to education for all in Turkey, the assessment of students with disabilities including different ethnicities, is performed only with regard to the Turkish language. When considered from this point of view, absolute nondiscriminatory evaluation is not mentioned. Even though the nation-state centred Turkish citizenship is based on a single religion (the Sunni sect of Islam) and a single language (Turkish), and this has been questioned since the 1980s, especially during the 1990s (Bezmez & Yardimci, 2010), saying that everybody has to be assessed using their native language is very optimistic in terms of the current structure of Turkey, in terms of its educational infrastructure and constitutional body. In Turkey, students with ID are diagnosed through educational assessment reports provided by Guidance and Research Centres (GRCs) which are the only authorized institutions offering diagnostic services for students in need of special education. These reports are based on the DSM-IV-TR criteria (APA, 2000) and in this respect the diagnosis process has been conducted in an unbiased manner, but without taking into account language differences.

Deinstitutionalization, full inclusion and schooling are highlighted in many legal texts as well as in the Special Education Services Regulation of Turkey (SESRT, 2006, amended 2012) as approved by Turkey as one of the stakeholders. However, there are still barriers to full participation, in that children with disabilities do not have the same opportunities to take part in educational settings as their typically developing peers. Schooling problem is one of the major barriers to full participation. Schooling problems of students with disabilities including students with ID have to be examined within three fields: schooling in formal education, schooling in inclusive educational settings, and schooling of girls with disabilities.

Initially, it was estimated that there were 1,105,630 individuals with special needs aged between 0 and 19 years in Turkey, and that 690,000 of those consisted of children with ID based on the ratio of individuals with special needs according to total population statistics in 2010 (Education Reform Initiative, 2010). National Education Statistics Formal Education (MoNE, 2012/13) reported that the numbers of school aged typically developing students engaged in formal (public) education was 15,239,702 whereas the number of students with ID was 212,701. The proportion of students with ID in formal education is just 1.39%. When both sets of statistics are considered, the delivered educational services for schooling of students with ID are chronically limited.

Secondly, as an example, in the U.S., 92.3% of students with ID aged between 6 and 21 were placed in inclusive settings, whereas a lower proportion was educated in segregated settings (National Center of Educational Statistics, NCES, 2009). In Turkey, there are currently 186,772 (37.68%) students with disabilities, most of whom are students with ID in inclusive settings (MoNE, 2012/13). Even though the number of students has increased year after year in inclusive settings, the national statistics for Turkey show that the number of segregated students with disabilities, including students with ID, is at a rate of 62.32%. Accordingly, segregation that has been intensively felt is still a fact of special education system of Turkey.

Thirdly, one of the most burning issues in Turkey is the lower standard of schooling of girls with disabilities including ID. The gender ratio is obtained by dividing the female gross schooling ratio by the male gross schooling ratio

multiplied by 100. The National Education Statistics Formal Education (MoNE, 2012/13) show that the gender ratio by educational year and level of education is 100.59% in primary schools and 102.94% in secondary (middle) schools for typically developing children, whereas the schooling ratio of girls in special education (formal education) is 62.39%. However, no research has been conducted on whether the low ratio of girls in special education is due to a higher prevalence of disabilities for male individuals, or due to the possible effect of cultural and religious factors as well as social indicators in Turkey.

Vocational education has also been questioned in terms of the lower employment ratio of individuals with ID. In the formal education system, currently 2,583 students with ID are educated in 172 special education training centres (grade III) and 6,096 students with ID are educated in 103 special education vocational training centres (ID-grade III) in Turkey (MoNE, 2012/2013). Although these schools have been established in order for individuals with disabilities to gain vocational skills before entering professional life (SESRT, Article 45(1)), the employment ratio of these students with ID is very much lower compared to the population with hearing, visual, and orthopedic disabilities. Companies are obligated to employ individuals with disabilities at a rate of 3% (in the private sector) and 4% (in the public sector) in accordance with quota regulations (Labour Law, No: 4857, amended 2008, Article 30), but many companies prefer to employ individuals with hearing, visual, and orthopedic disabilities rather than individuals with ID or are willing to pay a fine without employing any of the disabled population in Turkey.

Another obstacle to the full participation of students with ID in educational settings is poverty as an external factor. According to a World Report on Disability (World Health Organization, WHO, 2011), one of the main challenges to providing effective support services for parents of students with disabilities in developing countries is poverty that increases the risk of a poor quality of life (Dardas & Ahmad, 2014). A recent study revealed that 59.4% of 3,009 Turkish families of children with ID and autism are below the hunger threshold, whereas 95.7% of these groups are below the poverty line. In addition, almost half of such families have lower SES scores (45.8%) based on low educational and occupational scores (Meral, Cavkaytar, Turnbull & Wang, in press). Therefore, the parents of students with ID who struggle with poverty have limited access to disability-related services and special education services in Turkey as a developing country.

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